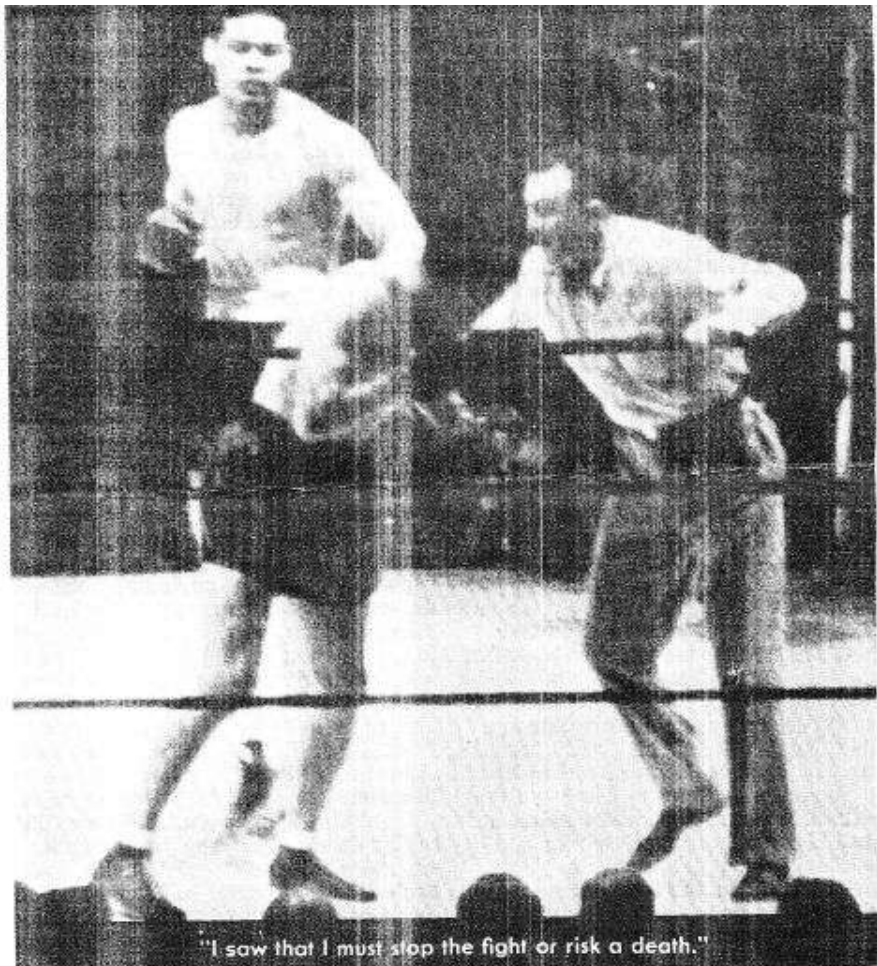


FIGHTS I HAD TO STOP— *and why*

A famous referee
reveals the fears
and grim hazards
of a thankless job

BY ARTHUR
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"I saw that I must stop the fight or risk a death."

READING TIME • 10 MINUTES 11 SECONDS

IN the Bronx Coliseum some weeks ago Primo Flores, a rugged Puerto Rican, pounded clever Lew Jenkins of Texas all through the first four rounds. The long, lank Texan used a straight left to stop most of the punches, but Primo kept boring in, slamming away with both fists, and once in a while he connected with a wallop that shook the Texas boy down to the heels and brought the 11,000 spectators to their feet, roaring with delight. At the end of the third round Primo crossed his right to the chin and dropped Jenkins in a heap. Lew unscrambled himself and got up quickly, but his legs were quivery. The bell saved him.

Primo kept up the attack in the fifth round, and it looked like curtains for Lew, but the boy had his wits about him, and he studied the slugger as if he were merely a problem to solve instead of a smashing machine that was wearing him down. At last Lew saw what he was waiting for and, as Primo started to fight his way out of a corner, met him with a right cross to the chin that pasted him up against the ropes. There he stuck.

I noticed that there was a vacant stare in his eyes and his face was twisted into a silly grin. His arms were so dead that he couldn't put up his guard. He was out on his feet,

and only the ropes prevented him from sprawling on the floor. The roaring fans saw nothing but the grin and thought he was all right, but I knew Primo was through for the evening. Before Jenkins could get set to throw another punch—which might have killed Primo—I stepped in, pushed him away, and gave him the decision.

The crowd burst into a roar that made the walls quiver, and the only distinct sound in it was the word "Robber!" that split its way through the noise. An infuriated big man jumped up from his ringside seat and threw his cigar at me. It landed, hot end first, on my neck. A hundred others would have thrown anything they could get hold of. But I knew I was right, and it's part of a referee's business not to let the crazy antics of the crowd disturb him.

When I say one more punch might have killed Primo Flores, I mean exactly that. The ring floor is padded with felt under the tightly stretched canvas, so there is no danger of a fall cracking a man's skull. But when a fighter, already unconscious, is knocked to the floor, he is liable to suffer a concussion; for his limp body whirls down like a flailing whip—and his head is the snapper at the end of the lash.

That is the way Ernie Schaaf died when Primo Carnera sent him down with what looked like a light left hook on the chin. But Schaaf that night

was only a week out of the Boston hospital where he had been laid up with influenza. He had kept it a secret, so as not to miss the fight, and he seemed to be in fine shape when the New York doctors examined him. Ernie was a likely contender for the championship of the world, and if he had entirely recovered from the grippe, he might have beaten Carnera without much trouble—but influenza had stolen away his resistance, and his courage led him to his death.

Men have died in the ring because referees have not seen how weak they were and made them fight on. A death that made Max Baer give up fighting for a long time happened early in his career. His terrific overhand right hit Frankie Campbell so hard that the boy lay helpless against a corner of the ropes, which held him on his feet—just as they held up Primo Flores.

Baer saw how far gone Campbell was and begged the referee to stop the fight. But the crowd was yelling for a knockout, and the referee refused to interfere. Baer unwillingly knocked out Campbell, who soon died of his injuries. You can't blame the referee for not knowing how badly Campbell was hurt. Any one might have made the same honest mistake.

The referee lives between the devil and the deep sea. He is the boss of the ring, responsible not only for a good fight but for the life of every man whose fight he controls. He must have

in mind a clear picture of the fighters' condition at every stage of the game. Often he must decide in a split second whether to let a beaten man keep on trying or to stop him when one more punch might put him out forever.

And no matter how he decides, he is wrong—in the hot minds of fans who have bets down.

At the same time, some fighters seem to have as many lives as a cat. There was Johnny Risko, the big roly-poly boy from Cleveland. They called Risko the Rubber Man, because no matter how hard he was hit he'd come bouncing back for more.

I refereed his fight with Schmeling that was to decide which should be the contender. In the sixth round Schmeling drove in a perfectly timed right cross to the chin—his best punch; remember what it did to Joe Louis—and sent Risko in a nose dive to the floor. It is well known that when they fall face down they don't get up; so as I began to count Johnny out I was thinking of what a fine game effort he had made; too bad he was out of luck. But when I called "Six!" the Rubber Man pushed himself up and propped himself on one knee. I couldn't believe it, and went on counting. At nine Risko stood up and began to throw punches when Schmeling came in to finish the job. Somehow he managed to stay till the bell, and he came out strong for the seventh. But Schmeling had the heavier artillery, and he got to Johnny so hard and so often that I had to stop it in the ninth and give Max the decision. Tough as Risko was, there was no sense in letting him take any more chances.

It was a very different story when I stopped the second Louis-Schmeling fight and, I believe, saved Schmeling's life. Most of the fans expected Louis to get even for the awful wallop the German had given him in their first battle, but no one had any idea that Joe would blast him off the face of the earth. At the first tap of the gong Louis started after Max as if he thought the man had lived too long. Max side-stepped, broke ground, smothered up, tried every trick he knew to escape the executioner. For a little more than two minutes Schmeling saved himself; then Louis shot both fists at him as a hunter would fire both barrels of a gun.

The left caught Max on the chin and toppled him over the ropes, while the right, almost at the same instant, landed over the kidneys and broke a rib off its socket on the spine. Not only that, but chipped off a jagged bit of the bone that stabbed the lungs like a dagger. I heard Schmeling's scream of agony above the bellowing of the crowd. I don't think he was conscious of it, for he hung there, collapsed. Only for a moment, though, and then he rallied what little strength he had, tried to free himself and fight on. I saw that Schmeling's eyes were set in a blank vacant stare; that he was helpless and seemed badly hurt internally; that I must stop the fight

or risk a death. I moved Louis back and raised his arm to signify victory. Schmeling's seconds carried him to his corner, limp and writhing every time he drew a breath. They soon had Max in an ambulance, on his way to the hospital, where he stayed for weeks before he recovered enough to be carried aboard ship for home. That night was once I was not cursed for stopping a fight.

ALL the fights I stop are not so close to tragedy, though the referee must always be on the watch for danger and interfere before it is too late. In a Brooklyn club not long ago a boy in a four-round preliminary bout caught a hot left hook on his chin and came down on the back of his head so hard that it caused a slight concussion. He lay flat on his back, arms spread out on the canvas, eyes wide open but seeing nothing.

As I stood over him counting the ten, his right leg was stuck up in the air at an angle of forty-five degrees, quivering like a banjo string. It was the queerest knockout I ever saw. After the count, his seconds carried him to his corner and worked over him.

Maybe a minute passed before the knocked-out boy came back to life. He jumped off the stool, put up his hands, and came out sparring. I got in front of him and took hold of his arm.

"What's the matter?" he asked me. "I ain't done anything wrong!"

"The fight's over," I told him. "You've been knocked out." He looked at me, and I could see he wasn't far from crying with rage and disappointment.

"Listen, son," I said, as I was leading him to his corner. "You've been knocked out—that's liable to happen to anybody. But you've got the right stuff in you, and if you keep on trying you'll make good."

I hope I helped him to cheer up; for a lad with a heart like that deserves all the encouragement you can give him.

If the athletic commissions of all the states would agree on the same rules, that would make it much easier for the referees. Better for the boxers, too. As it is, fighters from a distance sometimes are apt to do things that our rules forbid, and thereby to run the risk of getting into serious trouble.

Max Baer came to New York from the Pacific Coast, where he had earned a big reputation, and he was matched with Max Schmeling as a step toward the championship of the world. In the first round, Baer, coming out of a mix-up, grabbed Schmeling by the left elbow, spun him around and socked him with a left hook that didn't do him a bit of good. Baer did it so quickly and smoothly that probably not one tenth of the crowd saw it. I stepped in and waved Baer back.

"You can't do that," I told him. "The rules don't allow you to hold with one hand and hit with the other."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Baer replied. "I

didn't know." But in the second round he did it again, and I warned him once more. He promised it wouldn't happen again, but in the next round he gave Schmeling another whirl and cracked him with a hot one. I concluded that Baer had been allowed to fight that way in California, so that holding and hitting had become a habit. It gave him an unfair advantage over Schmeling, who, by the way, is one of the cleanest fighters I know. But I also had to consider the people who had paid their good money to see a first-class bout and would be disappointed if I stopped it. I got in between the men and took Baer to one side.

"This is the third time I've had to warn you for holding and hitting," I said to him, "and that's just about the limit. It's to your interest to obey the rules, and if you keep on violating a rule this way, out you go."

"Oh, I clean forgot all about it," said Baer. "I won't let it happen again."

"It'll be bad for you if you do," I said.

The fight had been stopped for fully fifteen seconds while this talk went on, and the crowd boomed me, of course; for what they wanted was to see one man or the other win the match, and to blaze with the rules. But Baer is an intelligent lad, and he appreciated the warning so well that he didn't offend again. He knocked Schmeling out in the eleventh, and he did it fairly and cleanly.

WHEN Lou Ambers fought Henry Armstrong last August and regained the lightweight title he had lost to him, I was referee, and I came in for some of the fiercest razzing and booing ever heard. Armstrong's friends thought I was letting Ambers hit him on the breaks, which was just the opposite to the fact. It happened this way: Armstrong, in his usual slam-bang style, rushed Ambers across the ring, pinned him against the ropes by jamming his head against Ambers' chest, and began to fire away with both fists. Then Lou showed how much he had profited by experience in their first fight, and gave Armstrong a surprise.

He clutched Henry's left elbow in his right hand, swung him around and skipped away down the line—without hitting or attempting to hit a blow. That was slick work, and fair-minded people would have applauded it. But when were partisans ever fair-minded, especially partisans with bets on their favorite? The more Henry bored in and started to pound Lou on the ropes, the more Lou whirled him around and went away from there in a hurry, and the more Henry's rooters yelled "Robber!" because they thought I was letting Lou get away with murder. It's funny to see how prejudice blinds people's eyes and paralyzes their judgment. But the referee must go on, like the baseball umpire, calling them as he sees them and ignoring the incidental abuse.

THE END